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THE THIRST

FOR

THE LIVING GOD.

BY

REV. FRANCIS G. PEABODY, D.D.

AMERICAN UNITARIAN ASSOCIATION,
BOSTON.

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THE THIRST FOR THE LIVING GOD.

"My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God." — PSALMS, xlii, 2.

I WISH to speak to you of the signs of the times in which we live; but it seems as if I must be mistaken in my text. Certainly the distinctive mark of our generation does not at once appear to be its thirst for a living God. At the first glance, indeed, no text could seem less applicable. The conspicuous activities and occupations of the time are so far removed from any such devout desire, the thirst of the time is so insatiable for its new resources of knowledge, luxury and power, that such a text, chosen to represent the spirit of the age, may well seem absurdly misapplied. It is much easier to talk — as so many do talk — of the age as without any living God, a worldly, indifferent, scientific, materialistic, godless time. Thirst enough there seems to be — a thirst which is almost feverish — for the possessions, ambitions, and indulgences of the time, but where, we may lightly ask, is the thirst for God? Yet when the deeper impulses of the age are more carefully scrutinized, and as its larger tendencies disclose themselves, this first impression is not likely to last. The fact is that there seems to be one kind of living and thinking on the surface of the age, and quite another kind, moving quite another way, within its depths. The one is like the eddies which diversify a stream; the

other is the current which underlies them; and it is as though we were watching such a stream, whose eddies are so turbulent and refluent that its true course seems reversed. Quietly and silently the deeper current of the time sweeps on, yet it makes itself felt at last. When in some later age a philosophic historian looks back upon the characteristics of our time, he is not likely to be so misled by its superficial character as to call it an indifferent or a godless time. He will be judging then not by the eddies, but by the underlying current, and he will observe there a sweep of tendency very different from that which at first forces itself upon our view. Beneath all the bewildering activities and splendid acquisitions of our day, he will, I feel sure, observe an ever-increasing and profound sense of dissatisfaction with these results. He will see that these very interests which seemed so absorbing opened of their own accord into larger interests and deeper problems. Looking back thus upon us, such a student will certainly not be able to say that this was an age of conviction or of faith, but he can hardly help speaking of it as a *thirsty* time, a generation in which, after the briefest possible self-glorifying and sense of gain, there has come over thoughtful minds a great dissatisfaction, as though all that was known would be worse than vanity unless it opened out into the assurance of something more.

Thus the text which I have chosen may be untrue to the superficial living which prevails in this as in every age, but I believe it strikes with increasing clearness the note of the heart of the time. There is scarcely a phase of philosophy about us, or a really profound experience which we observe, which does not illustrate the increasing thirst of the human soul for the living God. Beneath the harsh noises of our day there is this permanent undertone, continuing like the sounds of nature

which we hear only as other noises are stilled. Amid this apparent satiety and self-sufficiency of the age, there appears this divine restlessness. Each gain in things which appear to make a living God superfluous seems to compel men to some new aspect of religion, or to some new substitute for faith. A thirsty time; — not a time when the soul is satisfied, but when it is growing parched even to torture, and is demanding that its thirst be somehow slaked, — a time when souls and systems are coming, as the Psalmist says that the deer comes in summer, to springs that once ran free, and are finding there nothing but dry, hot stones, and then, panting for the water brooks, are turning from these barren resources of the past and thirsting for the signs of a present and living God, — such is the scene which the age, in its deeper living and thinking, seems to present, and which contradicts and corrects our first impression of the times. It is this underlying and fundamental character which I wish now very imperfectly to trace. Let us see this deeper desire uttering itself, first, in the thought of the time, and then in its life, and then let us ask ourselves what we can do to meet and satisfy this profound and spiritual thirst.

Take, in the first place, the philosophy of the time, and consider the outcome of those forms of philosophy which, to the religious mind, are most unpromising and repelling. For the last twenty years philosophical unbelief has been taking shape among English-speaking people under two types. One we call positivism, the other agnosticism. Now, whatever these two types of thought had to debate about they seemed to have this one point of agreement — that each of them expressly withheld the thoughts of men from any sense of a living God. Yet, strangely enough, nothing which the history of the times presents seems to illustrate so strongly as do these very schools of thought the increasing thirst of philoso-

phy for a genuine religious life. It may be said that they do not give this satisfying conviction, but it cannot be said, in the light of their last expressions, that they do not thirst for it. Each of them, having run its brief course of reaction and of denial, has already set itself to the renewal — nay, to the deepening — of the religious emotions which it seemed to ignore. We are even brought, in the most striking way, to a time of collision and controversy between the two, each of them maintaining, with no slight heat, that in it alone lie the elements of true religion and the satisfaction of this human thirst. On the one hand is the theologian of the unknowable, and on the other hand the devotee of the unworshipable, each bent upon emphasizing the very elements in the conception of a living God which the other is forced to omit. One is inspired by the mystery of the universe; the other by the dignity of human life. One sees behind the play of nature's forces that unknown force "from which all things proceed;" to the other, religion is religion only as it is addressed to that which can be known and loved.

Thus, from one point of view, each deliverance is as negative as it can well be. The one may be justly called the "gnost of a religion;" the other cannot be called even that ghost which shows that a reality has been some time there. Yet, from another and profounder point of view, each is contributing an essential part to the thought of a living God. The one offers the element of power; the other that of love. Each is expressing to the utmost which the system permits, this demand of life for the permanently real. Each feels the necessity of satisfying this restlessness of the age for that which it can revere. Each recognizes that in this satisfaction lies the test of the system and the largest problem of its thought. What does all this mean, but so much testimony from the most unprejudiced witnesses that the intellectual thirst of

the age is for something which can be called a living God?

Or take, once more, what seems to me one of the most curious and instructive phases of philosophy among us, — that which calls itself the "ethical movement." Here is, at first sight, another attempt of a far more practical and sympathetic kind to withdraw the attention of the time from all that is not tangible and human to the immediate problems and tragedies of human needs. Not a living God, but a living and improved human society, is what it thirsts to see. Not a distant heaven, it says, but a present earth, is the true scene of regeneration. Not worship, but work, is the true offering. I need not say what a reproach is offered to the work of the Christian Church when in the midst of its activities it could occur even to a few people that any such ethical enterprise needed undertaking. It is the practical confession that the people whose business it is to do the work are not doing it. Surely one ought to be able to turn on any society for ethical culture and say — as a distinguished layman once said when asked to join a society for the prevention of pauperism — "I belong to one such society already; the Christian Church." But the ethical movement has a deeper lesson than this to teach. It goes its way of reaction and self-exclusion as though its principles naturally separated it from the worshipping world, but when it comes to give account of these principles, its dynamic is no other than that which has always inspired moral sacrifices and found beauty in duty-doing. The ethical aim fulfils itself and it opens into ideals which are manifestly religious. When a man frankly commits himself to principles of idealism, when he is able to say that he keeps the sense of union "with that universal life to whose influence we have opened the channels of our being," when he "feels constrained to interpret the uni-

verse in terms of goodness," then I should not feel satisfied to classify such a man as a "suppressed Theist," for his Theism appears to me confessed and undisguised. It may be in vain to say here, as it was in vain to say of Mr. Spencer or of Mr. Harrison, that permanent peace is discovered for religious faith, but surely there is nothing testified to by the ethical movement if it be not an increasing tendency to recognize the religious aspect of conduct and to satisfy the thirst of the time for a living God.

Only two generations ago the great philosopher Fichte passed through much the same transition in his thought which this ethical movement is now exhibiting, and I have always found the history of his mind among the most instructive incidents which any student can examine. In his first phase of development the moral order of the world was to him enough to believe. Kant's Imperative controlled his thought. Ethical passion filled his writing. "This moral order," he cried, "is God and we need no other." But soon his teaching assumes a wholly different tone. Ethical culture, instead of satisfying the life of the soul, now demonstrates to him that the life of the soul is undeveloped. Truly to live, one's life must be merged in the Universal life which is the great reality. So long as one would be anything of himself, his true life has not begun. Thus, in his first phase, the one abiding reality was the moral personality of the individual; in his second phase the one abiding reality was that central life of which the individual was but the reflection. This transition in Fichte's thought has usually been described as a revolution. It has been supposed that there lay an unbridged chasm between his earlier and his later works; and that he frankly accepted this self-contradiction. It was not until one of our own Unitarian scholars examined the work of Fichte that the unity throughout the whole was observed. Fichte himself announced in

his later writings that this unity existed in his mind. It was not self-contradiction, it was only enlargement of view, which led him from the ethical to the religious position. The one when completely analyzed was seen to rest upon the other. The only sufficient foundation for moral culture was in confidence toward the universe. The only adequate impulse for self-development was the spirit of self-surrender. He who would save his life must lose it, and he who was ready to lose it, the same would find it. I find in this incident of history, as in the ethical movement which it prefigures, solemn lessons both for the moralists and for the Churches. On the one hand, let not those in whom moral purposes are thus compelling imagine that they have a conflict with the methods of religion. The only way in which such a conflict can be prolonged must be through lack of philosophy and ignorance of history. Given a pure impulse to self-sacrifice for the good of men, and with it any degree of power in philosophical analysis, and sooner or later the ethical intention will discover that its motive power and permanent inspiration are nothing less than the thirst for a manifestation of the living God. And, on the other hand, let not the Churches suppose that, in lessening their emphasis on worship, in absorbing themselves in what men call practical usefulness, and shaping themselves into ethical-culture clubs, they are likely to satisfy more completely the life of the time. The dynamic of Church work remains what it has always been, — the sense of the *divine reality*. Let the Churches take to themselves the full reproach of the ethical movement, and apply themselves to a better philanthropy, but let them take this other lesson of the same movement, — its confession that the sources of the moral force are intangible and ideal. It would be a sad day for any religious body if in its desire to be as ethical as the ethicists, it should depreciate the moral lift of religious inspiration.

It would be trying to pluck the fruits of life without fostering the roots of life. Here is the ethical movement, lifting its ethics into faith. Let it not meet any of us trying to turn our religion into terms of ethics. People may meet each other thus, standing as it were on the same step of opinion, but it makes a vast difference whether one is on his way up or on his way down.

I have dwelt too long upon these intellectual illustrations of the thirst of the time, — a thirst which will not be satisfied until philosophy has found a living God. For, after all, this ferment of the philosophies is but a suggestion of the spiritual restlessness which possesses multitudes about us, whether they study philosophy or not. What are the facts? All over this country there are thousands of thoughtful lives, trained in modern ways of thinking, beyond the reach of ecclesiasticism or of orthodoxy, yet with this great thirst upon their souls, panting, like the hart for the water brooks, for some assurance of a living God. These are the souls which test the force and the sympathy of a church or a minister. They do not demand a complicated or elaborate faith, but they thirst for faith in something. They yield themselves, in the lack of something better, to the most extravagant substitutes for faith. Anything, if it be nothing more religious than tipping tables or "astral bodies," is precious to them if it seems to suggest supernatural control. Their doubts and problems are not concerned with the details of belief; it is the very foundation which is undermined. A few years ago a young man came to me with his religious questionings. I never can forget his fierce and passionate attack. "Do not suppose," he said, "that I am not a good Baptist. I am a member of the Church. I am 'sound on immersion.' But tell me, tell me if you can, whether or no there is any *living God*." I do not need to delay in describing such experiences as this. It is this eager, receptive, waiting mood,

found in every community, which gives the chief human impulse to the life of a modern minister. It fills the preacher's work with a new exhilaration, for he is not dealing with a controversy against other forms of faith, but with a positively constructive work. It does not much matter for this end precisely wherein the confidence of his faith may lie. Let him believe *anything* concerning the ways of God supremely and announce his faith rationally and he is satisfying the thirst of many souls. Here is a time when many critics are observing the decline of religious influence and the decrease of Church attendance. It seems to me a time much more marked for the wonderful eagerness with which people still turn to the ministry of any man who speaks as if his religion were real. It is one more mark of the weary waiting and the divine discontent which marks the time, and which draws it, like the hart to the water brooks, toward any voice or Church or substitute for Church which seems likely to supply its thirst.

Such, then, it seems to me, is the deeper meaning of the signs of the times. And if, beneath its varied conflicts, there is this one demand of philosophy and life, then certainly it is time to ask some questions concerning the way in which this want is to be supplied. In the first place, then, I ask: "What is the kind of Church which is needed at such a time?" We talk of shaping the Church to suit the time! Well, what is the Church that suits the time? If we were to judge by the superficial look of the age we should be likely to say that the times demand a sensational, spectacular, secularized Church. This is precisely what many persons plead in thus perverting their Churches — that the times compel them to put lectures in the place of prayers and kitchens in the place of altars. But those who so judge are not really interpreting the time in those deeper movements which it is the very function of a Church to represent. The real demand of the

times, forcing itself upon us with a peculiar emphasis, is for Churches where the sense of God shall be living and real. There are many other things that may please, attract, and seem to satisfy, but the fundamental thirst which is created by the thought and the life of the times, is for this and nothing less. It is possible to be a preacher and to preach, not a living, but a dead God. It is possible to be a preacher and to preach on living themes, but not to preach on God at all. It is not for either of these ministrations that the world is really waiting. Each of them does its share in driving thirsty souls away from the Churches. When does a man preach a dead God? It is when his faith is retrospective, when the signs of divine control are clearer in the distant past than they are to-day, when the tendencies of the time seem to him all wrong, and the collapse of faith is imminent. This is the pessimism of religion. This is the atheism of theology. And yet this man is not preaching a dead God any more than he who has a brand-new, unhistorical faith to deliver, as though God had been waiting till now to be discovered, and the only method of revelation were a method of to-day. The preacher of the living God must have the historic sense. He must come not to destroy but to fulfil. It must be one law and one love which he discerns, binding the past with the present in the comprehensive unfolding of an Infinite design. "It is the law of human life," says Ruskin in a prophetic passage, "that we shall not build in the air, but in the already high-storied temple of the thoughts of our ancestors. The stronger of us may bring for increase of height some small white stone and on the stone a new name written, which is indeed done by those ordered to such masonry, nor ever in any great degree except by persons trained reverently in some large portion of the wisdom of the past."

So, on the other hand, with the preaching of themes which are living but are not divine. I do not wonder that in reaction from a theology which seemed dead the pulpit has been tempted by any subject which seemed living. A congregation, like any other audience, must be interested before it can be taught. A Church in these days must deal with that which is practical or die. And here, on the surface of the times, there presents itself, as we began by seeing, this great demand for instruction and culture and amusements which a Church may easily mistake for the real thirst of the soul. But it is not. Philosophy has shown us that it is not. Glimpses of personal experience have shown us that it is not. The Church which addresses itself, first of all, to these concerns which seem living and practical because they are superficial, is simply missing the wonderful opportunity which the times providentially present. It is watching the eddies, not the current of the age. People may seem to want to be entertained, cultivated, and amused through the ministration of religion, but the real want of the time is for a profounder help; and wherever there meets the life of the time the simple and rational preaching of a living God, there are the great successes of the pulpit. We hear it said that preaching should not be over the heads of the people, and that one must preach *down* to reach them. I am inclined to fear far more that the pulpit may be misled into not preaching *up* to the larger and higher needs of life; or, rather, it is not a question of up or down but a question of *in*, of penetrating beneath the apparent tendencies and interests of the age to the permanent and profounder need. A time when the pressure of life crowds out from so many minds the thought of God is the last of times to which the pulpit should adjust itself. It is the very time when the preaching of a living God comes with its full effect. High themes, confident

faith, undisguised devoutness — these are the qualities which tell with double force when so many waver and retreat. People long to have the events of the time, its social troubles, its national crises, its business methods, its home experiences, and all the multitudinous incidents of life which seem to have so little in them that is divine, taken up into the ways of God, so that the light of the presence of a living God shall shine through them with its infinite prodigality and give them a meaning which they did not have before. Many a weary listener has felt this deep demand as he has waited through a sermon which dealt with what was living, but was economical of what was eternal. "Oh! for some answer," he has murmured, "to the deeper human cry; for some enlargement of the theme into the proper realm of worship." Throughout this ministration, however scientific or artistic or literary it may be, there is no complete satisfaction for that thirst which is slaked by nothing less than communion with the eternal. "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God."

This then is the Church for the times — the Church of a living God. And now I ask once more: How is this kind of Church to be strengthened and developed? It has its two factors — its minister and its people — and for each of these I have a word to say. On the one hand, I want to speak of that which is really a subordinate matter — the minister's intellectual life. It seems to me that the times demand of the clergy just what we often hear it said, that the times have outgrown, — *a revival of theological study*. A great many people, and among them a great many preachers, think that "live preaching" has not much to do with theology and had better let it alone. Such persons are commending that which is impossible. A man who is to preach about God and about duty, has but two theological alternatives. He can choose between

bad theology and good theology; but even while he is condemning theology, he is theologizing. I know very well what can be said in scorn of theology. Theology is not religion. Libraries are not the only fountains of inspiration. "The measure of learning," as the beginner of modern theology once for all said, "is not the measure of piety." I know that if the study of theology is to remain a fit introduction to the ministry of religion, theology must have a broader definition. It must include all the evidence which leads to God. It must claim for its department the study of philanthropy as well as the study of opinions. It must include the literature of devoutness as well as the literature of dogmatics. And yet I feel sure that it is a dangerous time for the preaching of a living God, when ministers are so easily diverted from the themes of theology, thus broadly defined, as the centre of their studies. A minister stands for a specialty. His office is the maintenance of the religious life. He is to preach about God. Now it is possible that he should strengthen his own religious convictions through the literature of art or science or *belles-lettres*, but he is certainly not thus approaching most directly to his theme. He is not doing what other specialists do, or what commands the respect of other specialists. Knowing little of theology, he will easily fall into the ranks of those who think there is little to know, just as smatterers in science are the first to offer hasty judgments and easy ridicule concerning scientific affairs. Add to this the strength contributed to any mind by contact with great and comprehensive thinkers of one's own calling. Whether one is to agree or not with the great philosophers and theologians, it is from them that he will get both his intellectual grasp and his intellectual modesty. Still further, no mistake could be greater than to suppose that devotion to professional studies is what makes dull, metaphysical or essay-writing preachers.

The simple fact is that the great preachers of the Christian Church have been its great theologians. Augustine, Anselm, Bernard, Luther, Calvin, Schleiermacher, Maurice, Chalmers, Newman, Channing — these men at the same time revived the preaching of the Church and remoulded its theology. The one function did not exclude the other. On the contrary ample learning permitted simplicity of speech. It is so with every preacher. He must have a background, not of sentimentalism or poetry, or of the affairs of the day, but of well-ordered knowledge concerning the proper themes of his calling, and if he has not habitually addressed his mind to these themes, then he may sentimentalize or entertain or discuss as he will, but he will not for any length of time mislead a community into the belief that he has a right to stand before them as the interpreter of the ways of a living God. "Behold!" says many a minister, like the fishermen of Galilee, "We have toiled all night and taken nothing;" and then the answer comes, "Launch out into the *deep*, and let down your nets for a draught." It is this dabbling in the shallow places of one's professional life which ruins the career of so many fishers of men. It is for him who obeys the summons to the deeper waters of his vocation that the net immediately is filled.

I pass to higher ways than this of study through which a Church shall satisfy the thirst for a living God; — and I choose out of them all this quality alike for minister and people, — a larger loyalty to the spirit of Jesus Christ. We hear it said that a live faith will outgrow the Christian limitations, and that a mediator between the soul and God is an interruption of communion. But in reality the discipleship of Christ exists for no other thing than to make this communion uninterrupted, and there is no other way of communion so straight and clear. "Show us the *Father*," said the disciple, "and it sufficeth us;" and the

answer was : "He that hath seen me, hath seen the Father." A man, that is to say, who has lived in intimacy with Jesus Christ is not likely to look in vain for a Father in heaven. His Christian loyalty deepens and clarifies his Theism. It is in the companionship with Jesus Christ that one comes to know God best as a living God. A great many problems may remain open concerning the person and work of Jesus of Nazareth, but this at least is sure, — that he had a wonderful sense of the nearness and reality of God. When a man is looking for other truths he may perhaps go elsewhere, but when his soul is thirsting for a living God, then certainly what Jesus said is true, "The water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life." This is the natural basis of the authority of Jesus. To come in the course of one's experience upon one towering personality to whom the sense of God is meat and drink, and in whom duty becomes grace through this illuminating of his way, to be taken out of one's solitude and feel this life touching one's own through all its experiences, yet sustained and disciplined throughout by this transfiguring faith, — that is a recognition of authority which is healthful and scientific and invigorating and humbling all at once. The more one is set free from false and external authority the more he needs the authority of a master soul. The more the problem of the time is seen to be the preaching of a living God, the more unlikely shall we be to outgrow the mediating force of Christian loyalty. Far more probably will come the cry which the American representative of Spencerian philosophy already foresees, when "the kingdoms of this world shall be the kingdoms of Christ and he shall reign, King of kings and Lord of lords."

There remains but one other way which I need mention in which a Church can meet this thirst of the time; one other weapon with which this battle of the age is to be

fought. Yet it is the weapon without which all that I have named will be in vain. Serious studies, Christian faith, — these are but contributions to the one possession which can make religion reach the souls that need it. I need not say that it is what the Apostle calls "the sword of the Spirit," the possession of a consecrated character, the eloquence of the life that is lived with God. After all, only one thing can make people sure that there is a living God and that is his effect on living souls. After all, there is but one kind of Church which can truly slake the thirst of the time, and that is a Church which develops and sustains holy lives. There is but one proof of life; it is life itself. When we see a soul manifestly sustained of God, then we are sure that God lives. Thus the secret of the power and success of any Church lies, not in the eloquence of its preacher or the elaboration of its ritual, but simply in the unconscious manifestation by each individual among its congregation of the reality of the life of God. This is the ministry which all may share and the responsibility which none can avoid. This is what makes a Church a power of salvation for souls, — that there is found in it, amid the restlessness, depressions, and perplexities of the time, the calmness of a stable faith. This, then, becomes the deepest prayer which can be offered for a Christian Church, — that even as the cry with which men come to it must be that cry with which our psalm begins, "My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God," so the word with which they depart may be the song of trust with which the psalm concludes; "Why art thou cast down, O my soul? and why art thou disquieted within me? Hope thou in God: for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God."

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